

# The fabric of trade



## PANDEMIC PERUSING

SHYAM SARAN

During my diplomatic assignment in Indonesia two decades ago, I was fascinated by the extraordinary range and styles of the country's famed textiles, in particular its colourful "Ikats". I soon became aware of the intimate affinities between the textile traditions of India and Indonesia and this led to a very successful exhibition of old and contemporary textiles of the two countries, entitled

"Woven Magic," curated by one of India's best-known experts on the subject, Jasleen Dhamija. But it is not only Indonesia where Indian textiles were popular over centuries. They became an integral part of the global spice trade, with Indian textiles being exchanged for the much sought-after spices from South East Asia. India became not only the source of different kinds of textiles for South East Asia and even as far as Japan, but also an *entrepot* for the spice trade. The bulk of the textiles trade were woven cottons, although some high-value silks such as the Patola from Gujarat were treasured by royalty and aristocracy. Ports such as Cambay, Surat in Gujarat, Calicut on the Malabar coast and Masulipatnam and Nagapattinam on the Coromandel coast served as centres for the exchange between East and West and became prosperous in the bargain. It is this extended and exciting history of textiles for spices trade which is the subject of *Woven Cargoes: Indian*

*Textiles in the East* (Thames and Hudson, 1998). Its author is John Guy, currently at the New York Met and formerly of London's Victoria and Albert Museum, which arguably has the best collection of these textiles. It is the enforced lockdown, courtesy Covid-19, that turned my attention to this richly illustrated volume which had lain on my bookshelf for the past several years meriting only occasional and cursory attention. I have now read it cover to cover and found it contains a fascinating slice of history of which most Indians are only dimly aware.

John Guy's introduction sets the stage for this narrative: "Textiles were a principal commodity in the trade of the pre-industrial age and India's were in demand from China to the Mediterranean. Indian cottons were prized for their fineness of weave, brilliance of colour, rich variety of designs and a dyeing technology that achieved a fastness of colour

unrivalled in the world."

Before the advent of the colonial age in Asia, there was little literary record about this trade except for stray references in Chinese records. Zhao Rukua, the harbour master at the Chinese port of Quanzhou in the early 13th century, refers to imports of "foreign cloth" from Gujarat, Malwa, Malabar and the Coromandel coast, which were in demand in southern China. There is a Tamil language inscription from the same period in Quanzhou where a resident Tamil trading community dedicates a Hindu temple. China also imported Indian cloth from South East Asia.

South East Asia accounted for the bulk of India's trade in textiles. Indian weavers often made fabrics with custom-made designs for foreign customers. One ubiquitous pattern from South East Asia is the "saw tooth" or *tumbal* pattern on the borders of textile pieces. This design became popular in India such as in temple sarees. Indian motifs were much sought-after. These include hunting scenes, elephants and horses, parrots and geese. There were

also more abstract patterns such as an interlocking circle design. The tree of life is a frequent motif. There were also plain cottons in demand. The muslin from Bengal, where Karimganj was the centre, was prized for its high quality and was celebrated as "woven air". It had markets both east and west.

The textile for spices trade was in the hands of Gujarati and Arab merchants and those from the Coromandel and Malabar coasts until they were shouldered aside by the Portuguese, the Dutch and then the English using superior fire power. A 17th century French traveller Tavernier, who is quoted in the book, describes the flourishing port of Masulipatnam as "... the sole place from which vessels sail for Pegu, Siam, Arakan, Bengal, Cochin, China, Mecca and Hormuz and also for the islands of Madagascar and the Manilas".

This trade, Tavernier says, was in the hands of the "Klings" (used in South East Asia to describe those from Kalinga or Odisha but covers those from the eastern seaboard in general), Chettiars, Chulias (Tamil Muslims) and also Arab, Persian and European traders. For some

time the European traders were operating side by side with the Indian and Arab traders but then gradually displaced the latter often by the force of arms. Towards the end of the 18th century, the trade was effectively in the hands of the Dutch East India company which had captured the key port of Melaka (now in Malaysia). The textile industry in India was eventually destroyed by cheap mill made cloth from England and the textile-for-spices trade came to an end by the 19th century. But even in Europe, Indian textile designs and colour patterns continued to be popular.

With the intrusion of Western colonialism, the centuries-old patterns of trade and rich traditions of textile production faded from memory but the imprint of Indian textiles still survives across South East Asia. John Guy's book is a fitting tribute to that incredible history.

*(The writer is a former foreign secretary and a senior fellow, CPR)*

*Pandemic Perusing is an occasional freewheeling column on books and reading by our writers and reviewers*